

Eötvös Loránd University

Faculty of Humanities



Theses of the PhD Dissertation

ÁDÁM MASÁT

THE BERLIN WALL AND THE REFUGEE PROBLEM

Doctoral School of History

Dr. Gábor Erdődy DSc, Doctor of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, full professor,
Head of the Doctoral School

Modern and Contemporary World History Doctoral Program

Dr. András Balogh DSc, full professor, Head of the Doctoral Programme

Members of the doctoral committee and their scientific degree:

Dr. István Majoros DSc, full professor, Head of the Committee

Dr. Gábor Székely DSc, full professor, Reviewer

Dr. László J. Kiss CSc, full professor, Reviewer

Dr. Gábor Búr PhD, associate professor, Secretary of the Committee

Dr. Csaba Békés PhD, Member of the Committee

Supervisor and his scientific degree: Dr. Zoltán Maruzsa PhD, assistant professor

Budapest, 2014

1. Introduction

Original documents on the Berlin Wall and the East German refugee problem were hardly accessible to the researchers until recently, primarily because the archives of the German Democratic Republic were not open to the public until the regime change. Most of the essays published in Western Europe before the fall of the Berlin Wall relied exclusively on West German references only. The bibliographic review, which appeared for the 20th anniversary of the rise of the Wall,¹ indicates that most of the essays until the 1980s were dominated by journalistic contributions lacking any serious scientific grounding.

After the regime change, the opening of the series of archives allowed the researchers to thoroughly explore details of the topic. It has turned out that the historical essays, which had been published during the standing of the Wall, had to be refined and extended relying on the already available original documents deposited in the archives. The files and documents, which report the details of the events on the side of the GDR and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, are especially valuable for the historian. Most importantly, the vast documentaries on the construction of the Wall allow the researcher to understand better the preliminary events and actions, the decision itself, the preparation for the closure of the border and its implementation.

Since the regime change, dozens of reports on personal experiences, popular reviews, journalistic writings, and advertising materials have appeared in the topic, which should be studied by the historian only with a critical eye and by carefully checking the scientific literature and original sources. At the same time, different historical articles, which otherwise meet the rigorous scientific measures, are often in apparent contradiction with one another. Furthermore, there are excellent German experts of either the refugee problem and the Berlin Wall (for example, Helge Heidemeyer and Hans-Hermann Hertle, respectively), but the relationship between the two topics is barely explored. In Hungary, there has not been any scientific monographs published on the Berlin Wall and the refugee problem so far. Although the gross volume about the history of Berlin, edited by

¹ HAUPT, Michael: *Die Berliner Mauer. Vorgeschichte, Bau, Folgen. Literaturbericht und Bibliographie zum 20. Jahrestag des 13. August, 1981*. München, Bernard & Graefe, 1981. (*Schriften der Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte Band 21*)

István Németh and Gábor Tollas in 2008,² presents both documents and essays, the refugee problem is not discussed in detail. The German historians working in this field have only recently focused their attention on the exploration of this relationship and have managed to clarify a couple of questions. There are however several debated, open questions and formerly accepted facts have been queried again, which indicate that this is a still actively studied and yet unexplored area of Berlin's history. For example, the fundamental question "When was the decision made about building the Wall?" has been disputed. The researcher getting into the topic soon faces unanswered or controversial questions.

2. Topic of the dissertation, its time frame and structure

The major goal of the dissertation is the presentation of the Berlin Wall and the East German refugee problem. The East German refugee problem had a central role in the rise and the fall of the Berlin Wall. Accordingly, the dissertation presents the relationship between the refugee problem and the Berlin Wall instead of containing parallel explanations. This relationship has been known for a long time, but it has not been properly explored and clarified.

The time frame for the dissertation is 1945 and 1990, because all the problems related to the divided Berlin, the pre-history of the refugee problem, and the divided Germany date back to the end of the World War II. The dissertation does not end with 9 November 1989, when the Wall falls, but gives a quick overview on the route to the German reunification.

The dissertation consists of five main chapters following a chronological and logical order, in addition to chapters of the introduction to the topic (Chapter 1), introduction to the terminology (Chapter 2), and the summary (Chapter 8). The first part (Chapter 3) presents the evolution of the division of Berlin, starting from the end of World War II, followed by the blockade, and finally the manifestation of the two German countries. The second part (Chapter 4) is devoted to the history of the refugee problem

² *Berlin, a megosztott város*. Ed.: NÉMETH István – TOLLAS Gábor. Budapest, ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, 2008.

until 1961 and analyzes the tendencies leading to the construction of the Wall. Using the available statistical data and reports on the refugee trends it was possible to show how the outflow of manpower had led to an unsustainable situation for the economy of GDR. This part is followed by the most important chapter of the dissertation, the chapter, which presents the construction of the Berlin Wall from several points of view (Chapter 5). I have thoroughly studied the circumstances of the decision for the construction of the Wall, and the technical implementation of the closure of the border and its effects. I was especially interested in how the sector border transformed to a state border, and the influence of the closure between the two parts of the city on the life of the citizens. The period between 1961 and 1989 is discussed in the fourth part (Chapter 6) including the elaboration of several special topics within this time frame. I have investigated the legal background of the illegal immigration and the fire command. I have devoted a separate section for the desertions, the most common manner of escaping, with a special emphasis on the increasing refugee wave in the late 1980s. I overview the different cases of victims of the Wall relying on the most recent historical discussions and publications. The fifth part (Chapter 7) closes the main text with the discussion of the collapse of the East Central European socialist regimes, the history of the GDR in 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the presentation of the way towards the German reunification. Within Chapter 7 an entire section discusses the escapes to the embassies of the East Central European countries and the Hungarian border opening. The latter provided a solution to the refugee problem and also contributed to the fall of the Berlin Wall in an indirect way.

3. Sources for the research, methodology, and results

I have carried out research in four German archives. In the Department Military Archives in Freiburg (Bundesarchiv, Abteilung Militärarchiv), I have primarily studied the documents related to the National People's Army, the People's Police, and the border protection corps in order to understand better the details of the refugee problem. I have found in this archive important and formerly unpublished documents concerning the rise and fall of the Berlin Wall. Documents of the Landesarchiv Berlin provided insight into

the blockade of Berlin, the West German echo to the rise of the Wall, and the situation of commuters. In the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Archives (BstU), I have focused on the refugee problem during the period between 1961 and 1989. In addition, I have also found documents on the functioning of the state security in East Central European socialist countries. In the Foundation Archives of Parties and Mass Organizations of the GDR in the Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv, SAPMO) I have studied the originals related to Walter Ulbricht and the party documents from 1989. Furthermore, I have carried out research in the National Archives of Hungary.

The dissertation is based on a number of primary, preferably yet unpublished, sources. Of course, the secondary literature, handbooks, monographs, and other scientific essays are essential to the foundations of this topic. Considering the entire body of the dissertation, Chapter 5 contains most of the primary, unpublished documents and the provided appendices were also selected based on the originality of the documents. In debated questions, I have considered the opinion and the published research papers of experts in the field (see for example, Section 4.4 presenting data about the refugee problem and Section 7.5 about the fall of the Berlin Wall).

The most important thesis statements of the dissertation are listed as follows.

1. Decisions made by the Allies during the last three years of World War II were deterministic for the division of Germany and Berlin. If mixed occupation zones had been established according to the original British suggestions, or if Berlin had been partitioned differently, Germany and Berlin would probably not have been divided into two parts over several decades (Section 4.4).

2. The Western Allies have demonstrated already before the foundation of the two German states, during the blockade of Berlin that they would never give up their West Berlin position. Before 13 August 1961, the Western state securities had predicted a new blockade more likely (because of the former events), then the rise of a wall (Sections 3.3 and 5.5).

3. The construction of the inner German border served as an example for the rise of the Berlin Wall from a technological point of view (Sections 4.2 and 5.6).

4. At least 60% of the East Germans left the GDR through Berlin, because this passage was considered the least risky (Section 4.5).

5. The GDR got close to an economic collapse due to the constant outflow of manpower over more than a decade. A real collapse could have been avoided only with the closure of the borders. Thus, the refugee problem led to the construction of the Wall (Sections 4.4, 4.5, and 5.2).

6. The Berlin Wall has turned out to be an extremely efficient closure of the border. The number of refugees had substantially dropped from 1962, and from 1966 until the late 1980s (Sections 6.1 and 6.4).

7. Between 1961 and 1989 there were at least 138 victims of the Berlin Wall. The East German political leadership decided to kill the citizens trying to immigrate in order to keep its political power and maintain the regime, instead of providing them the right to the free movement for leaving the country (Section 6.5).

8. The number of refugees has increased again during the late 1980s, because many people tried to get to the West through a third country. As a result of this, the cooperation between the state securities of the socialist countries became more and more problematic (Section 6.6).

9. Gorbachev's reform implemented also in Poland, Hungary, and the other socialist countries did not offer a real alternative for the East German political leaders. Any loosening in the sharp ideological, political, economic, and cultural opposition to the FRG would question the foundations of the existence of the GDR, and thus would have led to a political collapse. This situation explains the lack of the reforms in the GDR in 1989 (Sections 7.1 and 7.2).

10. During 1989 the number of East German refugees, not willing to return their homes, has continuously increased in the FRG embassies. As a result of this, the FRG had to close several embassies, and at the same time, it also negotiated with the GDR to handle the situation. The example of successful immigrants arriving in the FRG has motivated even more East German refugees attempting to leave (Section 7.3).

11. The opening of the Western borders of Hungary for the East German refugees made the existence of the Berlin Wall meaningless (Section 7.4).

12. The direct cause of the fall of the Berlin Wall is related to bureaucratic chaos. The fall of the Berlin Wall would have sooner or later happened as a result of the relief of traveling regulations, but instead of such an abrupt fall, it would have certainly happened

in a much slower and a more controlled manner. The fall of the Berlin Wall opened the route to the German reunification and it symbolically indicated the dissolution of the communist block and the end of the Cold War (Sections 7.5 and 7.6).

4. Publications appeared in the topic of the dissertation

MASÁT Ádám: Magyarország és a két német állam kapcsolatának alakulása 1949 és 1989 között. In: *Újrakezdések krónikája. 1867–2001. Magyar–német diplomáciai kapcsolatok*. Ed.: PRÖHLE Gergely – UJVÁRY Gábor. Budapest, Corvina, 2001. 123–148. p. (ISBN 963 13 5145 9)

MASÁT Ádám: Berlin megosztottságának kialakulása. In: *Öt Kontinens (Az Új- és Jelenkori Egyetemes Történeti Tanszék közleményei)*. Ed.: MAJOROS István. Budapest, ELTE BTK Új- és Jelenkori Egyetemes Történeti Tanszék, 2004. 241–247. p. (ISSN 1589-3839)

MASÁT Ádám: A berlini fal megépítése (1961). In: *Berlin, a megosztott város*. Ed.: NÉMETH István – TOLLAS Gábor. Budapest, ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, 2008. 213–231. p. (ISBN 978 963 463 972 5)

MASÁT Ádám: A berlini fal leomlása (1989). In: *Berlin, a megosztott város*. Ed.: NÉMETH István – TOLLAS Gábor. Budapest, ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, 2008. 441–455. p. (ISBN 978 963 463 972 5)

MASÁT Ádám: Hétköznapiak a megosztott Berlinben. In: *Berlin, a megosztott város*. Ed.: NÉMETH István – TOLLAS Gábor. Budapest, ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, 2008. 549–569. p. (ISBN 978 963 463 972 5)

MASÁT Ádám: A keletnémet diktatórikus rendszer összeomlása és a német egyesülés (1989–1990). In: *Németföldről Németországba*. Ed.: FRANK Tibor. Budapest, Gondolat, 2012. 304–325. p. (ISBN 978 963 693 317 3)

MASÁT Ádám: A berlini fal áldozatai. In: *A megértés mint hivatás. Köszöntő kötet Erdélyi Ágnes 70. születésnapjára*. Ed.: BÁRÁNY Tibor – GÁSPÁR Zsuzsa – MARGÓCSY István – REICH Orsolya – VÉR Ádám. Budapest, L'Harmattan, 2014. 378–393. p. (ISBN 978 963 236 798 9)